



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Vanuatu

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by the report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, some churches and individuals object to the missionary activities of nontraditional denominations and continue to suggest that they be curtailed. There continues to be pressure to reinstate controls.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country is an island nation, covering 4,707 square miles, and its population is approximately 206,000. The great majority belongs to Christian churches, although many combine their Christian faith with cultural practices in place prior to the arrival of Christianity on the islands. Church membership primarily is Presbyterian (approximately 32 percent), Roman Catholic (13 percent), Anglican (13 percent), and Seventh-day Adventist (11 percent). Another 14 percent are members of the Church of Christ, the Apostolic Church, the Assemblies of God, and other Christian denominations. The John Frum Movement, a political party that also is an indigenous religious movement, is centered on the island of Tanna and includes about 5 percent of the population. Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) also are active. There are believed to be members of other religions within the foreign community who are free to practice their religions, but they are not known to proselytize or hold public religious ceremonies.

Missionaries representing several Western churches brought Christianity to the country in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Some foreign missionaries continue this work; however, the clergy of the established churches are now primarily indigenous. Missionaries represent the Church of Christ, Presbyterians, Seventh-day Adventists, Anglicans, and Roman Catholics. The Summer Institute of Linguistics, which translates the New Testament into indigenous languages, also is present.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The preamble of the Constitution refers to a commitment to traditional values and Christian principles; however, the Constitution also provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government does not tolerate the abuse of religious freedom, either by governmental or private actors.

Religious organizations are required to register with the Government; however, this law is not enforced.

The Government interacts with churches through the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Vanuatu Christian Council. Customarily, government oaths of office are taken on the Bible. The Government provides some financial help for the construction of churches for Vanuatu Christian Council members, provides grants to church-operated schools, and pays teachers' salaries at church-operated schools that have been in existence since the country's independence in 1980. These benefits are not available to non-Christian religious organizations. Government schools also schedule time each week for religious education conducted by representatives of council churches, using materials designed by those churches. Students whose parents do not wish them to attend the class are excused. Non-Christian groups are not permitted to teach their religions in public schools.

Aside from the activities of the Ministry of Home Affairs, use of government resources to support religious activities is not condoned (although there is no specific law prohibiting such support). If a formal request is given to the Government and permission is granted, governmental resources may be used.

The Government does not attempt to control missionary activity.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, some churches and individuals object to the missionary activities of nontraditional denominations and continue to suggest that they be curtailed. There continues to be pressure to reinstate controls.

In rural areas, traditional Melanesian communal decisionmaking predominates. If a member of the community proposes to introduce a significant change within the community, such as the establishment of a new church, the chief and the rest of the community must agree. If a new church is established without approval, the community views the action as a gesture of defiance by those who join the new church and as a threat to community solidarity. However, subsequent friction generally has been resolved through appeals from traditional leaders to uphold individual rights.

Religious representation at national events is organized through the Vanuatu Christian Council. Ecumenical activities of the council are limited to the interaction of its members.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

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